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Once Upon a Time on Mango Street

All cultures have their own set of fairytales and stories, and these compelling and fantastical tales take captive the cultural imagination and shape their culture's view of reality. Sometimes, however, these stories reinforce unhealthy constructs of reality that disempower certain members of society. In Sandra Cisneros' coming-of-age novel *The House on Mango Street*, European fairytale tropes reoccur throughout the narrative, inspiring and motivating the female characters. However, these fairytales ultimately base women's identity on an unhealthy binary and make promises that go unfulfilled in the real world. Thus, through her exploration of fairytale archetypes, the narrator Esperanza exposes the sexual and confining female identity espoused by fairytales and seeks to provide a healthy, non-binary construct for defining women.

The narrative's first obvious reference to a fairytale occurs in the vignette "The Family of Little Feet," in which Esperanza and her friends demonstrate the hold of the passive fairytale woman on their fancies. In the vignette, Esperanza's neighbors give her and her friends three pairs of high heels. Delighted, the girls cry, "Hurray! Today we are Cinderella because our feet fit exactly" (Cisneros 40). The heels connect the girls' identities to that of Cinderella's, and given the poverty and dullness of the girls' lives on Mango Street, it is no surprise that Cinderella's story of escape would have such power over the girls. However, Sugiyama argues that Cinderella's heels are ultimately a symbol of female passivity. She connects Cinderella's high heels to practices across cultures, such as footbinding in China, and demonstrates that the

practices of these cultures limit women's mobility and defines their beauty in terms of this limitation (13). Women thus become identified in terms of their passivity and inability to assert their autonomy. Similarly rather than rescuing herself, Cinderella waits for a handsome prince to recognize her beauty and steal her away from her life of poverty and drudgery. Nevertheless, by accepting this role of passivity, Cinderella attracts a prince who saves her from her miserable life, thus teaching girls and Esperanza and her friends in particular that passively waiting for a man is indeed the key to their freedom. In this way, Cinderella and her heels represent "the male definition of beauty . . . [that] requires, ultimately, submission and dependence" (18), and her happily ever after encourages the belief that passive but beautiful girls will be rewarded with wealth, love, and adventure.

However, when Esperanza and her friends embrace the Cinderella story, they discover that in the real world the romance promised to beautiful, passive women is replaced instead by men's lust and lechery. By donning the heels, Esperanza and her friends attempt to become Cinderella characters themselves, accepting their role of "submission and dependence" (Sugiyama 18) that high heels symbolize and attempting to make themselves beautiful in order to find a man. In doing so, the girls hope, like Cinderella, to be rescued from poverty and given a better life. However, these "Cinderellas" attract not the love of a handsome prince but the lust of a poor boy on a bike and a bum (41-42). Hence the girls discover that not love of beauty but the lust for sexual gratification and possession propels men to women. Wissman explains, "In *The House on Mango Street*, physical beauty does not position women as inevitable protagonists who will be rewarded with marriage and economic security. Rather, to be beautiful often engenders danger, confinement, and sexual assault" (21). Here, the girls learn that passively relying on a

man to save them involves allowing a man to sexually possess them, a frightening reality disguised by fairytales.

While the sexual nature of a prince “rescuing” a damsel horrifies Esperanza, other Mango Street women continue to hope in fairytales, further exposing the problems accompanying fairytale feminine ideals. For example, Marin’s story, while not overtly using fairytale archetypes, does draw on imagery that harkens back to fairytales. Marin, trapped in her domestic life, “is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life” (Cisneros 27). Like Cinderella, Marin passively waits for a “prince” to change her fate. However, Marin recognizes that in real life, in order to attract such a prince, she must employ her sexuality. Consequently, Marin stands on the porch every night and flaunts her body, watching boys call to her as they pass (27). While Esperanza views sexual realities as a rude awakening to the fairytale dream, Marin believes so strongly in the promises fairytales make to passive, dependent women that she is willing to trade love for sex to find a man who will rescue her. Nevertheless, Marin never receives her happily ever after: “Marin, under the streetlight, dancing by herself, is singing the same song somewhere. I know” (27). Nobody came for Marin, yet she still waits for her Prince Charming. In this way the novel reveals the damaging effects of believing in fairytales, for Marin accepts not only passivity but sexual objectification but remains trapped in her world of poverty and domesticity, waiting for someone who will never come.

While Marin does not receive her happily ever after, Esperanza later uses the Rapunzel fairytale to tell the story of a woman who is “rescued” by a prince but finds a life of confinement awaiting her afterwards. Esperanza relates the story of Rafaela, a woman who “gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at” (Cisneros 79), even having to ask children to run errands for her (80). Esperanza explicitly draws

a connection between the entrapped Rafaela and Rapunzel by saying, “Rafaela leans out the window and leans on her elbow and dreams her hair is like Rapunzel’s” (79). Rapunzel, like Rafaela, was trapped in a tower that she could not escape, waiting for someone to set her free. However, Wissman explains the irony in Rafaela’s story, for she has already been “saved” by a prince, her husband, and yet he has imprisoned her once more in their own household (25). Rafaela has traded in one tower for another, and by comparing Rafaela to Rapunzel, Esperanza exposes the nonexistence of fairytales in the world of Mango Street: on Mango Street, the prince does not save Rapunzel from confinement but is the one who confines her. Becoming the beautiful, submissive woman of fairytales who waits for a husband to rescue her and thus depends on a husband does not work: for some, like Marin, the prince never comes, and for women like Rafaela, it is the husband who entraps her.

Rafaela is not the only married woman who stifles under confinement after her marriage; rather, the narrator uses windows in conjunction with women on numerous occasions to portray female confinement, an image that alludes to fairytale archetypes as well. Rapunzel is, of course, an obvious fairytale character who spends her time looking out the window of her tower, yet Gilbert and Gubar note that the original Queen in the Snow White story is first depicted as “sitting and sewing, framed by a window” (37). It seems, then, that the picture of a window reappears in several fairytale stories, and in these stories, the woman looking out the window remains enclosed in her domestic home yet gazes wistfully into the outside world. This same use of window imagery reoccurs throughout *The House on Mango Street*, and not just in Rafaela’s story; rather, Brunk notes that Marin, Esperanza’s great-grandmother, and Mamacita are all described as watching out the window, while Sally is depicted as not even being allowed to look out the window (142). The narrator uses this window imagery from fairytales to represent the

longing for freedom that fairytale women experience: “The time these women spend at the window reflects their dissatisfaction with their confinement and the inability to break free of it on their own” (142). Though these women, excepting Marin, are married and have supposedly received their “happily ever after,” they all yearn to be free from their domestic entrapment. Thus, the narrator of *The House on Mango Street* uses fairytale tropes, not to confirm their accuracy in real life, but to show that the passive heroine of fairytales is not free in real life but remains confined by her husband and wishing for a better life.

The fairytale archetype Esperanza as narrator draws on throughout the story corresponds to the “angel/monster” binary in feminist theory, yet the fairytale “angel” ideal does not offer the Mango Street women the freedom and happiness for which they search. In their seminal work on feminism, Gilbert and Gubar argue that not only in fairytales but throughout European literature, women are defined as either “angels” or “monsters.” The ideal “angel” is a woman of selflessness who lives a domestic life dedicated to pleasing and exalting her husband (21-23). In other words, the “angel” depends on her husband for her identity, just as the passive fairytale women depicted in *The House on Mango Street* depend on a man to give them freedom and thus identity. Interestingly, this “angel” ideal appears not only in European fairytales but also in Esperanza’s own culture. Petty explains that in Mexican lore, the ideal woman is the Virgin of Guadalupe, who “represents the passive, pure female force . . . As such, she represents the holy, chaste woman, the embodiment of feminine purity as well as the virtues of nurturing and self-sacrifice” (121). Thus, Esperanza is bombarded both in her American culture and in her Mexican culture by this submissive, “angel” identity, yet when she compares the fairytales supporting this ideal to her real-life experience, she finds the promises of reward to this angel empty. Thus,

Esperanza realizes she does not want this identity and must find a new one if she wants freedom and happiness.

While Esperanza rejects the identity of the fairytale angel, she at first chooses as her identity the “monster” or villain of the fairytales, failing to escape the female identity binary created by both European and Mexican culture. As Gilbert and Gubar explain, the woman who does not accept the role of “angel” but asserts her own “autonomy” instantly becomes the “monster,” an unnatural creature who uses her power for wicked and unfeminine purposes (28). Once again, a similar role exists in Mexican legend as well: the alternative to the Virgen of Guadalupe is la Malinche, the infamous traitor of her people who became Cortez’s mistress and by so doing claimed her own authority rather than submitting to the authority of her patriarchal culture (Petty 122). Like Gilbert and Gubar’s monster, this woman’s failure to embrace passivity immediately equates her with evil, and in both Mexican tradition and the European literature Gilbert and Gubar analyze, women are either angels or monsters, virgins or malinches. At first, rather than attempting to escape this restricting binary, Esperanza decides to become the monster, as shown in the powerful vignette “Beautiful and Cruel.” Esperanza says, “In the movies there is always one with red red lips who is beautiful and cruel . . . Her power is her own. She will not give it away” (Cisneros 89). Here, Esperanza envisions herself as a woman with power over males. Yet she associates this power with cruelty, becoming the monster and the malinche, who use their power for evil. At this point in the novel Esperanza fails to truly escape the restrictions and confinements placed on women, for she defines herself within these terms.

Although at first Esperanza chooses to define herself as the monster or malinche, by the end of the novel, Esperanza has moved beyond the restricting binary set up by the cultures around her and the fairytales these cultures employ, creating a positive female identity for herself

and for those who follow her. Throughout the novel, Esperanza becomes increasingly aware of the pain of her neighbors and of the selfishness of her wish to leave Mango Street and never return. This awareness comes to fruition in the final vignette when she promises to leave Mango Street but to also return: "I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (110). While in "Beautiful and Cruel" Esperanza's focus was to free herself at all costs, even at the risk of becoming cruel, here Esperanza's purpose shifts to escaping in order to also free those who cannot escape themselves. Clearly this perspective never characterizes the monster or the malinche, who both use their power to take care of themselves while harming or betraying their own people. In this way, Esperanza's final character transcends the fairytale binaries of angel and monster, virgin and malinche: she is not a submissive, passive woman who waits to be rescued by a man, nor does she use her power and autonomy for evil. Rather, she is a woman of strength and autonomy who uses this strength for good. Esperanza thus forges her own identity for herself and by doing so writes her own, new kind of fairytale.

While the cultural restrictions of feminine identity reinforced by fairytales influence Esperanza, in the end, she rejects them in favor of her own ideal. Esperanza realizes that there is no reward in the real world for the passive woman who depends on a man to save her: she will be turned into an object for sexual gratification and will then either be left waiting for Prince Charming or will be re-confined to her ivory tower. At first Esperanza views becoming the cruel villain as the only alternative identity to the submissive princess of the fairytales, but in the end, Esperanza also rejects this vision in favor of a strong yet kind woman who creates her own destiny yet returns for those who cannot do the same. By doing so, Esperanza offers an alternative vision for female identity not only to herself but to the women whose lives have guided her that will perhaps give these women a chance for a true happily ever after.

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